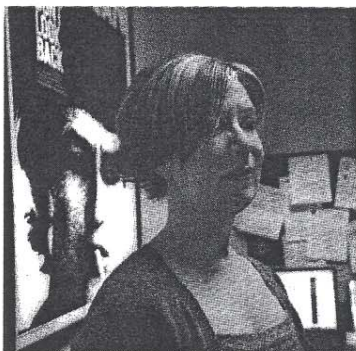


# Luring Movie Stars To Suffolk County



Maxine Hicks for The New York Times

Michelle Isabelle-Stark, Suffolk County's director of the Office of Cultural Affairs.

By DAVID EVERITT

## PORT JEFFERSON

IF Michelle Isabelle-Stark, Suffolk County's new director of the Office of Cultural Affairs, has her way, the beaches and towns of the Hamptons and the North Fork, and other county landmarks, will become familiar to moviegoers worldwide. That is because she is aggressively trying to attract filmmakers here for location shooting.

Although the county saw a burst of film activity in the 1980's — for example, scenes in "Wall Street," starring Michael Douglas, were filmed in the county — there has never been a steady influx of movie projects. Ms. Isabelle-Stark's plan is to apply a more business-oriented strategy than has been used.

"I approach the arts and film as infrastructures and as important economic contributors," she said in an interview at a restaurant here, where she lives. "It's been demonstrated that having a vibrant art and cultural scene in a community is a competitive advantage to attracting and retaining a knowledge economy."

Ms. Isabelle-Stark, 46, was appointed to her post in May. Her responsibilities include running the Suffolk County Film Office and the county's cultural arts program, which administers grants and promotes programs at local organizations like the Heckscher Museum of Art and the Cinema Arts Center.

A Michigan native who moved to Hicksville in her teens, Ms. Isabelle-Stark trained as a dancer at the State University of New York at Brockport. She also has an M.B.A. from the Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts. She worked at the Small

Business Development Center at Stony Brook, helping develop businesses from technological endeavors at the university. She was also an assistant to Mayor Jeanne Garant of Port Jefferson, where she helped inaugurate the annual Dickens Festival, an event held at Christmastime.

Ms. Isabelle-Stark's first priority, she said, is to market Suffolk County film locations over the Web. Previously, the film office relied on conventional mail.

"If I get calls from California, they're not going to wait to get pictures of locations in the mail," she said. "They want to be able to go to a Web site and pull up images in real time."

At this point, the film office is e-mailing location shots to production companies upon request, she said, but she hopes to have a complete location database up and running "within the year."

She also wants to address some economic disincentives faced by filmmakers in Suffolk County. For one, the county lies outside a film-union designation known as "the zone," which means that crews must be paid a higher overtime rate to work here than in areas closer to New York City.

In addition, government incentives and dollar exchange make Canada, in particular, attractive for moviemakers.

To compete more aggressively, Ms. Isabelle-Stark said, she would like to see county and local authorities "eliminate some film fees, offer rebates, eliminate local taxes."

Another obstacle is the sometimes confusing process of obtaining permits from the county's various jurisdictions. Complicating the process is the desire of local officials to keep beaches clear for visitors in summer.

"Some towns have fairly restrictive regulations, so it's helpful to know who you can talk to," said Lyn Pinezich, location manager for "The Forgotten," a science-fiction thriller starring Julianne Moore, which recently filmed in Caumsett State Park in Lloyd Neck and along the Hampton Bays coastline. "There are all these different kinds of towns, villages, hamlets."

Ms. Isabelle-Stark said she wanted to bring order to this situation. "I want to have one person in each jurisdiction to be a point person, so when a request comes in, I can e-mail them because they know their area better than I do," she said.

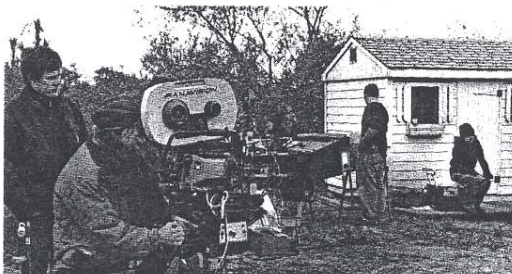
In some cases, this coordination between county and locality is something new. "Before I heard from Michelle, I didn't know that a county film department existed," said Sundry Schermeyer, Southampton's assistant superintendent of parks and recreation.

Ms. Isabelle-Stark also wants to spread



Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton on a Hamptons beach in a scene from "Something's Gotta Give." Below, Kevin Bacon, far left, directing a scene from his film "Loverboy" at Babylon's Oak Beach.

Bob Marshak/Columbia Pictures



Macall Polay/Loverboy Productions

word of the charms of the county, which she said had enormous potential as a location, and not just for movies set in the area, like the recent "Something's Gotta Give," starring Diane Keaton and Jack Nicholson.

The county could "replicate so many kinds of locations," she explained, including New England-type villages and European-style vineyards. Among its attractions, she said, are Centerport's Vanderbilt Mansion, Oheka Castle in Huntington, and Theodore Roosevelt Park in Montauk. "Riverhead is to me the great untold story," she added. "It's got architecture from every period. It looks like Lowell, Massachusetts. It's got rivers, it's got farms, it's got wineries."

The film office has advertised in "Variety" and "Hollywood Reporter," and she said she planned more advertising.

Ms. Isabelle-Stark replaced Chris Cooke, who led the office for 12 years, until last January; repeated efforts to locate him were unsuccessful. But local film-industry professionals say there was more filmmaking in the county in 2003 than in previous years.

"This past year has been busier for filmmaking in Suffolk than it has been for a long time,"

said Beth Kushnick of East Hampton, vice president of the Set Decorators Society of America and a nominee for the Suffolk County Film Commission, which advises the county executive on local filmmaking. Under the new executive, Steve Levy, the commission is to get new members and is scheduled to hold a strategy meeting next month.

But statistics are hard to pin down, partly because local records do not include movies that did not require permits because they were shot on private property, and partly because neither the county nor the New York State Governor's Office for Motion Picture and Television Development has a full record of 2002 productions.

Nine movies registered on the administrative radar of the county's film last year. They were already committed to the

county when Ms. Isabelle-Stark took over, but she was involved in finalizing arrangements for three movies shot late in the year: "The Forgotten"; the remake of "The Manchurian Candidate," starring Denzel Washington, which filmed in a Centerport home overlooking Northport harbor; and "Loverboy," directed by Kevin Bacon, which shot at Babylon's Oak Beach.

David Martin, location manager for "Loverboy," found the film office to be "very helpful," especially in steering him to the correct jurisdiction to gain permits. But Roger Majkowski, writer and director of "The Sound," a low-budget independent feature about a sound that makes men not want to have sex, criticized the film office's performance, saying he had difficulty getting permission to film from local officials. He, and Ms. Isabelle-Stark, said local officials were put off by the subject. She said the film office was not asked to get involved early enough; he said, "I think she had plenty of time."

The hope is that the year's string of projects, which overall seem to have gone smoothly, will give momentum to the efforts to lure filmmakers here, Ms. Kushnick said.

Ms. Isabelle-Stark compares the film business to other industries. "There's no reason why we can't come up with a plan for a county production cluster in the same way one's been developed for biotech and software," she said.